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The Things We Might Have Seen

By James David Barber

DURHAM, N. C.—Suddenly everybody and his uncle is raising the question of Mr. Nixon's fitness—as a person—to be President. For 27 years, Richard Nixon has been trying to tell us the answer. That what moves and excites him is not principle or policy or result, but an endless struggle for control. First to control himself. He is and has been—at least since 1946—a man who seemed to be hounded by the self-imposed "temptation" to let his enemies have it, to "get" them, to let all his damned-up anger find release in some glorious outburst.

The cost of repressing those feelings appears to have been very high: the sacrifice of spontaneity, a perennial wariness, a facade of humorless propriety, a pretense of happiness. Sometimes the cost has been too high; then the barriers have dropped away and he has mangled a Cambodia or a Constitution.

Then, as on Oct. 20, 1973, Nixon the suffering martyr becomes, for the moment, Nixon victorious.

Then to control others. He has from the start been tuned to the wavelengths of power. Every relationship is savored or despised in terms of dominance. Who's on top transcends, in his attention, what they are doing. Who's winning blots out what they are trying to win. The enlivening excitement comes in risk—how can he surprise them, confuse them, and, if need be, punish them and still keep their obedience? The thrill goes out of the drama when they fall for it. So there must be another trick, and another, escalating the stakes right up to the ultimate challenge.

But above all to control doubt. Mr. Nixon's checkered history is best understood as a fluctuation between moves to protect himself against doubts of his goodness and doubts of his manliness—a conflict which would split him right down the middle had he not found a way to manage it: by being "good" for a while (proper Richard, humble and sincere) and then "bad" in a burst (fighting Richard, heroic and daring). Time is his ally. When he finds "time running out," as he wrote across the top of his yellow pad on the eve of his first Cambodian adventure, he experiences with full force the compulsion his type is so prone to. Then he no longer chooses. He does what he "must" do.

We should have known because at least three times in the twentieth century other Presidents, different from Mr. Nixon in many respects but strikingly similar in character, have followed his path from initial flexibility to a final, rigid, self-defeating tragedy.

Who would have thought that Woodrow Wilson, adroitly maneuvering great progressive reforms through the Congress in his early Presidential years, would bring on his own disaster by stubbornly insisting on verbal trivialities in his League of Nations treaty?

Or that Herbert Hoover, the pragmatic "miracle worker" who negotiated relief for war-torn Europe in the midst of World War I, would freeze in opposition to relief for jobless Americans?

Or that Lyndon Johnson, Senate master of compromise, would wind up in the grip of a grisly compulsion to beat a distant province into submission, whatever the cost?

Well, we, had we been there, should have thought those things. We should have heard behind what each was saying what he was trying to tell us—about his person, about the way he experienced life. We should have remembered that the Presidency is dangerous, not some show-biz garden party. Now that hindsights let us see these things, in the life histories of Mr. Nixon and of the Presidency in our century, we can understand what we let him do in 1968 and 1972 and where that has left us in 1973. Thank God the Constitution gives us a way out.

Will we know next time?

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By Whitley Austin

SALINA, Kan.—The fate of President Nixon may be quickened at the filling station pump. He may tinker with public morals but he can't clobber the automobile and get away with it. In his America, the family car rates with apple pie and mother love.

The timing of his final downfall perhaps depends upon how quickly Americans perceive the connection between Mr. Nixon and the gas shortage. In the meantime, the President bumps over new detours. He is not altogether lost, however.

Out here in the prairie, we have a sympathy for the underdog. Sons of pioneers understand the loner. We remember that a Senator from Kansas, Edmund G. Ross, cast the vote that saved Andrew Johnson in the impeachment trial of 1868.

Despite the daily deluge from Washington, a residue of sentiment for the President has remained up to now. Seventy per cent of Kansas voters marked their ballots for him in 1972.

Today, he might be lucky to get 30 per cent. Tomorrow, if he pulled a surprise play of sufficient dramatic impact, he might regain at least a plurality of support.

Some Kansans would welcome such a game-saving touchdown. Like the President, they hate to be shown up as stupid, exercising bad judgment. No one likes to be a jilted lover—even a Nixon-lover.

But tomorrow, if the gas pumps dry up, industries shut down, houses grow cold and energy prices are blown higher than little Dorothy was to Oz, Mr. Nixon's friends will be limited to the old ladies who confuse him with Herbert Hoover.

My old friend Alf Landon stands by Mr. Nixon for opening up China. But the fortune cookie crumbles if Mr. Nixon closes down Europe, turns the Israelis into ingrates and continues to put the Arabs in bed with the Russians. History may record no more tragic blunder than our handing the Soviet Union the mineral wealth of North Africa and the Middle East. Rather than containing the Communists, we may give them the strategic resources to buy us. And all this for the trappings of a superpower, the megalomaniac fantasy that it is our duty to shape the world's destiny.

Personally, I fear Mr. Nixon. He is the game player who loves the quarterback sneak. In the crunch he believes in overkill. It is possible he no longer recognizes any truth other than that he fashions in his own mind. Whatever the Kansas delegation in Washington may say in public, in their private conversations some of them express similar fears.

Mr. Nixon should resign. I doubt that he will. But the impeachment process takes painfully long. If he does leave office, a Vice President must be ready to take over. The chaos that might result were the leadership of the nation to devolve upon the Speaker of the House is unthinkable.

As a Republican of Mr. Nixon's choice, but without the Watergate taint, Gerald Ford could continue to express the intent of the majority in the last Presidential election. He could be the surrogate for that mandate.

In foreign affairs, in domestic affairs, the United States needs a leader who can be believed, one who could bring together the Government, and demand cooperation from all branches. Perhaps Mr. Ford can do this. There may be others in Washington with more ability. Certainly he is not the greatest statesman to come down the pike since Abraham Lincoln. But Mr. Ford is the choice available, a reasonable choice. In this crisis, let's make it.

Such pragmatism, however, is cold comfort: new wars threaten and our patriotic dream of a white knight in the lead has become a nightmare.

I have confidence in America. But of what stern stuff must we be made to cope with all these unnecessary tragedies!

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